

Foreword to the second edition

In April 2020, the EPP Group adopted a comprehensive Position Paper on Asylum and Migration, following extensive discussions within the group. That paper, setting out our key priorities in the field of asylum and migration, is still very much relevant. Nevertheless, a number of events have affected the asylum and migration policies of the Union.

The global pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2-virus, which started in March 2020, saw the reintroduction of internal border controls and disrupted the functioning of the Schengen Area and the free movement of people. It led to a drastic, temporary drop in the number of irregular arrivals to the EU. However, irregular entries in the first three quarters of 2022 are the highest recorded since 2016, showing, inter alia, a delayed effect of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan on migration to Europe. The Western Balkan and Central Mediterranean remain the most active routes. As a result, several Member States have either kept or reintroduced internal border controls.

In the summer of 2021, the Lukashenko regime initiated a hybrid attack on the Eastern borders of the EU through the instrumentalisation of migrants. The Belarusian authorities organised the entry of third-country nationals from the Middle East to Minsk and their onward movement into the EU, including through the use of force towards the migrants and violations of Lithuanian, Latvian and Polish sovereignty. This instrumentalisation of migrants follows a pattern previously seen in Evros, Greece, by Turkish authorities in February 2020 and Ceuta, Spain, by Moroccan authorities in May 2020, as well as the ongoing instrumentalisation seen in Cyprus, through the Green Line by Türkiye over the last 6 years.

On 24 February 2022, Russia initiated an illegal war of aggression against Ukraine, provoking the largest displacement of people in Europe since the World War II, and the first ever activation of the EU Temporary Protection Directive since its adoption in 2001 in the wake of the war in Yugoslavia. The unprecedented solidarity with Ukrainian refugees is a strength of the EU and illustrates that there is a willingness to provide solidarity to Member States under pressure. However, the reception of Ukrainian refugees, alongside the high number of third-country nationals applying for international protection in the EU, is straining the asylum and reception systems of the Member States.

Furthermore, Russia's brutal aggression against Ukraine triggered a global food crisis, which has hit developing countries particularly hard and has put pressure on front-line Member States, such as Romania and Poland, which had been ensuring the transit of grain from Ukraine.

In this context, this Position Paper on Asylum and Migration provides for targeted revision and updates of the April 2020 paper, in particular by introducing new policy proposals to address situations of instrumentalisation and to identify the lessons learned from the reception of Ukrainian refugees and the Temporary Protection Directive.

Introduction

Mass migration is a global phenomenon. People have always moved between and within continents, driven by wars and conflict, fear, poverty, instability, climate change, hunger, and the hope of finding a better place to live. People also move in a legitimate and organised way to study, work or join their family in other countries. However, this position paper mainly focuses on people who seek international protection and on illegal migration.

Christian Democracy is rooted in the principle of human dignity, which dictates one cannot deny help to those in need. Inspired by this principle, the EPP Group wants to ensure a humane approach to migration grounded in responsible solutions.

In 2021, crises of various kinds forced 16.1 million people to flee. This increased the total number of forcibly displaced people up to be 103 million at mid-2022, according to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). At the end of 2021, around 53.2 million of these were internally displaced and the rest were displaced outside their country of origin.

Managing migration has been and will continue to be one of the defining, intergenerational challenges and opportunities for Europe. The experience of the recent decade has shown that effective action is needed to curb illegal migration, which will continue to be a persisting challenge in the years to come.

Underlying trends in economic development, demographic changes, globalisation in transport and communications as well as instability in neighbouring regions, all mean

that people will continue seeking to come into the EU for refuge, in search for a better life, or to reunite with their close family members. It is therefore imperative that the European Union finally finds a common European response to this challenge that ensures meaningful solidarity and responsibility in accordance with Article 80 TFEU.

In 2015/2016, the European Union was confronted with an exceptional challenge when almost two million people arrived at its shores in the space of two years, often risking their lives at the hands of smugglers on their way to Europe.

A number of measures were introduced to address that challenge and new legislation has been proposed, but the fight against human traffickers and smugglers, the promotion of legal pathways, the strengthening of our external borders and addressing illegal migration are all intertwined. Nevertheless, the European Union is still discussing ways to find a common approach in the fields of asylum and migration.

The ongoing discussions for the establishment of a new comprehensive legislative framework must be an urgent priority in order to have the reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) in place during this parliamentary term.

Protecting the vulnerable - The fight against smuggling and trafficking networks

According to Europol, more than 90% of people who arrive in the EU irregularly turn to smugglers to facilitate part of their entire journey. The Western Balkan - with 45% of all irregular entry detections into the European Union recorded during 2022 - and the Central Mediterranean routes continue to be the most active migratory routes. These journeys do not necessarily end with the arrival into EU territory. Once the external borders have been crossed the criminal networks continue their activity, facilitating unauthorised secondary movements within the EU and laying the ground for further sexual or labour exploitation and the setup of organised crime structures. It is incumbent on all Member States and their authorities to make best efforts to prevent people from boarding unsafe boats and becoming entrapped by human smugglers and traffickers.

The restrictive measures put in place during the pandemic showed the ability of smug-

gling and trafficking networks to adapt quickly by using new routes, technologies and *modi operandi*. Along the entirety of every route, the cynical and inhumane business models of smuggling networks put human life, in particular women and children, at risk. Discouraging illegal migration must therefore be at the core of our policies as a means of combating criminal networks and their exploitation of vulnerable people.

It is up to Member States to decide who enters their territory – not criminals. It is crucial to reinforce every measure against human smugglers and traffickers, break their business model and end their impunity. Enhanced cross-border cooperation, increased information sharing and coordination between Member States, coordinated operational actions, as well as adequate training and resources for competent authorities and agencies, are all essential to addressing issues such as human trafficking and to ensure that smugglers and traffickers do not have any space to act. The Commission should evaluate the actions already taken against human smuggling and trafficking and, where necessary, propose legislative and non-legislative measures to strengthen the fight against these criminal networks and to protect the lives of refugees.

Closer engagement, information sharing, coordination and a well-structured and permanent cooperation with third countries remains key to preventing migrant smuggling and trafficking. This includes building up capacity with regard to effective asylum legislation, law enforcement and border management, but also in fields such as education, institutional and economic reforms and social policy. Promoting information and awareness-raising campaigns about the risks of smuggling, trafficking and illegal migration is also necessary. This is one crucial component to preventing prospective migrants and asylum seekers, including people in particularly vulnerable situations such as children, from embarking on hazardous journeys towards the EU.

This well-structured and permanent cooperation with third countries is a key factor for achieving the objectives of European integrated border management. In this context, the EPP Group welcomes actions from the Commission to deploy FRONTEX in third countries, through operational agreements. The Commission through EU funds should also support Member States that bilaterally deploy officers and implement border protection measures where FRONTEX does not operate, without prejudice to the necessary coherence and coordination at EU level

The use and monitoring of social media platforms can play a central role as a tool to identify smuggling and trafficking networks and prevent people from resorting to their cynical and inhumane methods. EU-funded humanitarian operations should continue to take into consideration children's specific needs and vulnerabilities and ensure their protection when they are displaced. All EU programmes need to continue, with strict budgetary oversight and scrutiny in key countries of origin and transit, and should be implemented as part of a coherent strategy with third countries.

The Commission should annually evaluate EU migration policy, including any push and pull factors, as well as the readiness and preparedness of Western Balkan countries to constructively collaborate with Member States on migration issues in order to enhance the Union's ability for strategic foresight and crisis preparedness, which is essential for the Union's resilience within the field.

Children's best interests must be assessed and taken into account as a primary consideration in all actions or decisions that concern them, while the right of every child to be treated as a child first and foremost should be ensured.

Strengthening the Schengen area: key actions¹

The Schengen area is one of the most tangible achievements of European integration and one of the main pillars of the European project. It guarantees the free movement of more than 400 million EU citizens, alongside third-country nationals legally present on the territory of the Union.

In recent years, the Schengen area has been under extraordinary pressure because of the threats posed by terrorism, radicalisation, organised crime, the unauthorised secondary movements of third-country nationals and, more recently, the restrictions imposed by the pandemic.

The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (FRONTEX) is a milestone in the history of European border management and an essential element in ensuring the effective protection of Europe's external borders. The establishment of a fully-fledged European Border and Coast Guard system has turned the principles of shared responsibilities and solidarity between Member States and the Union into a tangible reality. The agency closely monitors

the protection of the EU's external borders and supports the application of Union measures relating to their management while Member States retain the primary responsibility for the management of their external borders in their own national interest and in the wider interest of all Member States. It works to quickly identify and address any security threats, in full collaboration with the Member States, on the territory on which its agents are operating.

The EPP Group firmly supports FRONTEX as a key EU agency and strongly rejects any attempt to weaken its role in the protection of the EU's external borders. Furthermore, the EPP Group takes note of the agency's Fundamental Rights Officer arguing for more FRONTEX involvement to monitor and support Member States in their obligations set out in the EU acquis.

We also welcome the expansion of FRONTEX's mandate through the regulation (EU) 2019/1896, which allows the agency to sign operational agreements and deploy teams with executive powers in any third country. The EU institutions should ensure adequate funding for the Agency to carry out its mandate with the necessary equipment and personnel. In this regard, the Agency should without further delay reach the strategic target of having a capacity of 10 000 operational staff. EU Agency's working at home or abroad must always uphold the values of the European Union.

The EPP Group welcomes the Commission policy document developing a multiannual strategic policy for European integrated border management (EIBM) as an instrument of critical importance for Member States and the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCG) in the management of the EU external borders.

A number of enhanced border control tools are being brought forward following the adoption of rules on the interoperability of information systems, including the entry-exit system, the Visa Information System, the Schengen Information System and the European Travel Information and Authorisation System to increase information exchange between Member States. The EPP Group welcomes the commitment of the Commission to put in place the most advanced entry- and information sharing-system in order to protect the Union and its citizens.

¹ Additional measures of priority for the EPP Group in order to protect the external borders of the Union are in the EPP Group Position Paper on How to Combat Organised Crime in the European Union.

The reform of the Eurodac system and the new regulation introducing screening of third-country nationals should be concluded swiftly in order to close any information gaps and blind spots, while ensuring the fundamental rights of all applicants. The extended categories for registration of third-country nationals in the Eurodac system will, in addition, provide better monitoring of movements within the EU and prevent identity fraud.

All Justice and Home Affairs agencies with a role in border management should have adequate funding in order to ensure that their daily operations and their ability to protect the EU's external borders and security within the Schengen area are guaranteed, especially in light of their operational support to Member States to manage the displacement caused by Russia's war in Ukraine. Operations must respect fundamental rights and international law.

The Commission presented a proposal to amend the Schengen Border Code and the Schengen Evaluation and Monitoring Mechanism in order to make the Schengen Area stronger and more adaptable to constant challenges. In this regard, the EPP Group underlines that Member States retain their right to introduce temporary internal border controls as a measure of last resort, which should only be set up exceptionally and proportionately for a limited period. Any such measure should be withdrawn as soon as the threats cease to exist. Therefore, the EPP Group welcomes proposals on alternatives to internal border controls.

In times where Europe's security architecture is under threat, the enlargement of the Schengen Area would provide additional security and better control at Europe's external borders. In this regard, the EPP Group welcomes the full accession of Croatia to the Schengen area and urges the Council to take all the necessary steps to adopt its decision on the full application of the provisions of the Schengen acquis to Bulgaria and Romania at the earliest possibility in 2023, thus ensuring the abolition of checks on persons at all internal borders for these Member States as soon as possible. Bulgaria and Romania are reliable partners, protecting the EU's external borders and effectively contributing to a high level of security and prosperity, as recent crises have shown. In the same way as has been the case with Croatia, the accession of Bulgaria and Romania would strengthen the Schengen area and would also help to ensure equal rights for all citizens within it.

The EPP group also welcomes the proposed provisions to the Schengen Borders Code, which explicitly oblige the European Commission to establish common minimum standards for the surveillance of the external land borders at European level, as well as the provisions setting out in more detail the possibilities for border surveillance in a situation of instrumentalisation of migrants, with an emphasis on preventive measures.

Improving Return and Readmission

Effectively implementing the CEAS and safeguarding the Schengen area requires an efficient return policy for those third-country nationals without legal grounds to stay in the EU.

Every year, around 500,000 third-country nationals are ordered to leave the EU, as they do not have the right to enter or remain on its territory. Only 19 percent are returned to countries outside the European continent, according to the European Court of Auditors. This increases slightly to 29 percent when taking into account countries in Europe. Despite the continuous efforts of Member States, the European Commission and FRONTEX, including the appointment of the EU Return Coordinator in March 2022 and the adoption of an EU Strategy for Voluntary Returns, the return rate is far from satisfactory. This often takes a toll, not only on the people involved, but also on the EU reception facilities and the local communities involved. It is imperative for the system that the number of returns increases substantially.

Increasing returns requires additional efforts by Member States and third countries. Member States' return systems need to work in a coordinated manner. Key measures include actively monitoring the situation of third-country nationals during the entire return procedure, reinforcing assistance to cooperative third-country nationals willing to depart voluntarily and ensuring the compliance with the obligation to return. Furthermore, there is a need to enhance information sharing and coordination on rejected applications between reception facilities and relevant actors involved on the ground to prevent absconding and secondary movements in full respect of fundamental rights. The completion of the recast of the Return Directive is therefore imperative. All return efforts should ensure, where possible and appropriate, that third-country nationals have their return decision processed in a

reception centre, without any unnecessary prolonged period of detentions.

The full implementation of the Schengen Information System for returns is also key to enhancing border procedures and preventing secondary movements.

The Member states should make full use of FRONTEX's new mandate to facilitate and coordinate returns, taking into account its extension both in internal and external dimensions, including in pre-return and post-return activities. We should also make a better use of the Return Coordinator to ensure an effective and common European return system.

In the framework of the Cotonou Agreement, each of the African and Caribbean Pacific States have committed to the return and readmission of any of its nationals who are irregularly present on the territory of a Member State of the European Union, at that Member State's request and without unnecessary delays. That commitment has not yielded expected results in this area. We therefore call to support the new EU-OACP Partnership Agreement for better enforceability of the migration-related aspects of EU-ACP cooperation and call for its ratification and entry into force. The EPP Group calls on the Council to ensure that all Member States unanimously support the adoption of the agreement as soon as possible.

Both the negotiation and implementation of readmission instruments should rely on a strong and consistent message that the EU and its Member States have the expectation of cooperation by the third country concerned. The Visa Code Regulation serves this purpose and should be used by the Union and its Member States. In this regard, the EPP Group underscores as a precondition for visa waiver that the third country aligns its visa policy with that of the EU.

It is necessary that the Commission reviews the effectiveness of the suspension mechanism in Article 8 of Regulation 2018/1806. Existing procedures are burdensome and cannot be readily applied when a problem surfaces. Member States should also be able to notify an increase of third-country nationals arriving via countries that have a visa waiver.

The EPP Group takes note of the successful use of visa conditionality and reiterates its call to expand the conditionality mechanism to also include development aid.

Nevertheless, cooperation should be mutu-

ally beneficial and based on the 'more for more' principle, including the EU Visa policy whereby additional efforts by countries of origin and transit are rewarded with increased cooperation and additional support from the EU.

All relevant EU policies, instruments and tools, including trade agreements, as well as development aid, legal migration and visa policies should be linked with the cooperation of third countries in the field of migration and return and readmission. It is crucial to take advantage of existing readmission agreements and for the EU and its Member States to conclude new readmission agreements on migration and mobility partnerships with third countries.

Periodic reviews on the level of cooperation should be undertaken to ensure partnerships are built on sustainable cooperation. Shared respect and responsibility for the protection of fundamental rights should be the foundation of all cooperation. Insufficient cooperation by countries of origin and transit should lead to a decrease in cooperation and support from the EU, without affecting necessary humanitarian aid.

For the internal dimension of its return mandate, FRONTEX should further enhance a common return platform for information gathering, analysis, planning and organisation of common actions in order to facilitate cooperation between Member States and third countries particularly for the organisation and implementation of return and readmission procedures.

It is crucial that return decisions are mutually recognised. While all Member States must strengthen their activities in the area, effectiveness of return can only be improved if we increase coordination between Member States and work towards a European approach. In this regard, the EPP Group supports the work of the EU Return Coordinator and the High Level Network for Return.

The European network of Immigration Liaison Officers, in combination with the FRONTEX Return Liaison Officers and European Migration Liaison Officers in third countries should lead to effective deployment in third countries and will place them in a position for appropriate oversight at an operational level based on concrete return or readmission requests by the Member States.

The EU Strategy on Voluntary Return and Reintegration, presented by the Commission in April 2021, and the operational strategy for more effective returns adopted by the Commission in January 2023 are important tools

to ensure a quicker and more sustainable return of third-country nationals. The EPP Group expects the EU and its Member States, within their respective competences, to implement the strategy in full, including encouraging and promoting specific social and work reintegration programmes. An EU strategy for forced returns should be prepared.

The CEAS and the New Migration and Asylum Pact

In 2020, the Commission proposed a New Pact on Migration and Asylum, which builds on the 2016 proposals for a reform of the CEAS. Its aim is to provide a comprehensive approach in the areas of border management, migration, asylum and integration, inter alia.

Our priorities have not substantially changed. For the EPP Group, it is of the utmost importance to put in place a common migration and asylum system able to function properly at all times and to respond to current and future migration crises and global migration trends. We need a system that protects those in need, European citizens, and the EU's external borders, aiming at rebuilding trust between Member States and confidence in the capacity of the European Union to manage migration.

Under the Pact, the new Regulation of Asylum and Migration Management includes a recast of the Dublin system to determine the Member State responsible. For the EPP Group, it is crucial that the new regulation ensures fair sharing of responsibility, better compliance with the rules and the hierarchy of criteria for determining which EU Member State is responsible for examining an asylum application, and the effective carrying out of transfers. The cooperation and trust between Member States must increase.

The principle of solidarity and fair sharing of responsibility, including its financial implications, between the Member States, should govern the asylum and migration system. In this context, the Regulation on Asylum and Migration Management establishes a solidarity mechanism to address situations of migratory pressure. For the EPP Group, it is essential that all Member States contribute, fairly under the solidarity mechanism. The EPP Group is in favour of a mandatory solidarity mechanism with flexible ways to support Member States in need, including through financial contributions, voluntary relocations and other measures.

The EU should ensure that the majority of asylum-seekers' applications are considered at the Union's external borders or in the transit zone of a Member State prior to a decision authorising the entry of the applicant into EU territory. The border procedure in the recast Asylum Procedure Regulation is an important tool to ensure the process for application is clear and to improve border management. Bearing in mind that the approval rate of asylum applications in the EU is less than 40 percent, the threshold for authorising the border procedure must be realistic. Furthermore, when applying the border procedure, Member States shall ensure that persons subject to it are not authorised to enter EU territory. Regardless, all applicants should experience acceptable and adequate conditions in EU reception facilities.

Notwithstanding, discussions should also continue on the possibility of allowing the lodging of asylum applications outside the EU territory, which could create a legal pathway to the Union for beneficiaries of international protection. In this context, the EPP Group also supports the quick adoption of the EU Resettlement Framework.

The new rules for asylum should make the system more efficient and resilient, discourage abuses and prevent unauthorised movements. There should also be clear and appropriate obligations for the applicants and defined consequences if they do not comply. The compliance of fundamental rights shall be a priority.

Every safe country, both EU Member States and third countries, in the Mediterranean has a role to play in search and rescue operations. Disembarkation should always take place in accordance with international law, even if it takes place outside the EU's territory.

Saving lives at sea is a legal obligation under both international and Union Law, but it is first and foremost an act of humanity and solidarity for those distressed at sea. Vessels conducting search and rescue operations must comply with relevant international and Union law, follow the instructions given by the competent Rescue Coordination Centre, follow the rules of, and cooperate with the Member State authorities and FRONTEX in order to ensure the safety of migrants. They should also operate under the conditions of safety and hygiene established within the applicable rules of the first entry countries. All EU Agencies, including FRONTEX, are obliged to uphold the fundamental rights for all those applying for asylum. The EPP Group calls on the Commission to put forward a Code of Conduct for the involvement of civil society organisations participating in search

and rescue activities, in order to avoid loss of life at sea and to ensure a humanitarian approach whilst further discouraging human smuggling and trafficking networks. In the preparation of such a Code of Conduct, the Commission should consult at the first stage FRONTEX and the Member State's authorities that are working on the front line and then other relevant actors, such as civil society organisations.

The EU should, as part of a coherent 'Africa Strategy', resume the discussion about regional disembarkation platforms on both sides of the Mediterranean where asylum seekers can be safely received and their claims assessed in an efficient, dignified and humane way. Such regional disembarkation platforms could be operated by the European Union Asylum Agency (EUAA) and FRONTEX without prejudice to the proper functioning of the reformed Dublin system.

The EU- Türkiye deal significantly reduced the migration pressure on Europe following the 2015/2016 migration crisis. However, since March 2020, Türkiye has stopped accepting any returns from the Greek islands, without any valid justification. Moreover, Türkiye refuses to cooperate with Cyprus on returns and at the same time continues to instrumentalise migrants through the Green Line. Additionally, the Turkish authorities do very little to implement their commitment under the Joint Statement to prevent illegal migration from Türkiye to the EU. The EU should step up its efforts in order to hold Türkiye to its commitments derived from the EU- Türkiye deal.

By establishing similar agreements with transit countries and countries of origin, illegal migration can be prevented while a large number of migrants can benefit from financial support in these countries.

Further strengthening and harmonising the CEAS rules should also ensure that treatment is equal across the EU in relative terms, and reduce undue pull factors for coming to the EU.

The ability for determining authorities to conduct a rigorous and fair examination of applications for international protection depends on a variety of factors that are inherent to their internal organisation, resources and functioning. The frontloading of asylum systems and the policy of investing in the quality of decision-making at first instance through the provision of sufficient resources for the competent authorities are key to swift and efficient asylum procedures, as well as training of their staff and key procedural guarantees to enable applicants to submit all elements

of their claims at the earliest possible stage.

Interoperability of large-scale IT systems such as Eurodac, Schengen Information System, Visa Information System, ECRIS TCN and Entry-Exit System that provide Member States and EU Agencies with crucial data to better manage visa applicants, control migration flows, follow unauthorised secondary movements and promptly assess security threats are all imperative for a well-managed asylum and migration system in the EU.

The role of the European Union Asylum Agency EUAA is crucial when it comes to providing support to Member States for the processing of applications for international protection, as well as for the training of caseworkers responsible for processing asylum claims. As a fully-fledged agency, the EUAA is now empowered with a broader list of tasks, which have proven to be essential in order to support Member States and third countries in dealing with asylum and migration.

Legal Migration

We must keep a fair and necessary distinction between those who arrive to the EU in a legal manner and those who arrive irregularly. Legal migration must have a central role in the overall discussion, including with third countries of origin and transit on how to cooperate in the management of migratory flows.

Labour migration has a significant territorial impact and brings both opportunities and challenges to an ageing and demographically declining EU. If managed successfully, legal labour migration can successfully complement other policies in reversing not only this demographic trend but also the labour gaps and the loss of workforce. However, educational, cultural and linguistic backgrounds can sometimes turn into divisive social obstacles. Therefore, along with policies to attract talent and create pathways for labour migration, other short- to long-term policies are needed in order to facilitate legal migrants' inclusion and integration into society.

Smart management of migration requires a proactive policy of sustainable, transparent, and accessible legal pathways that benefit Europe as well as the countries of origin, to better protect vulnerable people. This should not negatively affect the development prospects of developing countries.

The EU has to improve migration rules and explore ways of attracting manual labour

as well as highly skilled legal migrants and entrepreneurs who can fill vacant job posts and boost economic growth. The amended EU Blue Card Directive and the ongoing reforms of the Long-Term Residents Directive and the Single Permit Directive can contribute to improving labour situations in Europe as well as in the countries of origin. Member States' competences in this field must be respected and it is the Member States that determine the conditions for granting access to their labour markets.

We also need to strengthen our cooperation with third countries to proportionate factual, accurate information about the benefits of choosing legal and safe pathways instead of irregular and dangerous routes. The EU must engage in a structured and meaningful dialogue with those countries on legal migration needs and on cooperation in the fight against illegal migration, under the "more for more" principle.

Legal migration has to become part of the overall discussion, among other topics, with third countries of origin and transit on how to cooperate in the management of migration flows. The EU should foster the cooperation of SME's between Member States and third countries and push for a system of investment rather than solely aid. We need to engage businesses to inform them about the options and benefits of hiring third-country nationals and the legal procedures to do so, while fighting against the exploitation of irregular migrants and reinforcing sanctions against employers who act against the law. We need to make full use of an EU talent pool and talent partnerships to match labour market needs.

A reflection should start on possible ways to change the EU framework for managing legal and particularly labour migration, including consideration of point-based models such as the ones developed in Canada and other countries, and with respect to the competences of Member States.

Resettlement is a safe and legal alternative to irregular and dangerous journeys for people in need of protection, and a demonstration of European solidarity with non-EU countries hosting large numbers of persons fleeing war or persecution. It should remain up to the Member States to determine how many are resettled within the EU. The continued commitment of pledges by Member States to resettlement as a safe and legal pathway into the EU confirms that this remains a useful instrument in enabling people in need of international protection to arrive in the EU in an orderly, managed, safe

and dignified manner. At the same time, the responsibility for protection should not only be increased by the EU as a whole, but also equally by the international community, as this is currently shared in an uneven manner at the global level. Further development in this regard should be fostered and based on the UN Refugee Forum, where the principle of international responsibility-sharing should be put into concrete action.

Addressing the root causes of migration

The EPP Group firmly believes that migration must be integrated and mainstreamed into all relevant EU policies, in particular EU aid, trade and foreign policies. The EU should provide assistance to third countries in order to reduce significant loss of highly skilled workers. By boosting investment and support for third countries, the EU can better prevent irregular economic migration, while creating job opportunities and strengthening the economies of and standard of living in third countries.

One of the overarching objectives of EU aid policy must also be to address the root causes of migration, including demographic, climate and economic challenges and conflicts. The focus should therefore be on assisting the development of stable institutions in the immediate area of Europe to promote sustainable societal development. The EPP Group calls for the full implementation of the NDICI Global Europe Instrument and regular evaluations to ensure its correct application.

Addressing the migration problem at its core requires partnership, notably with Africa. This will not only necessitate increased development funding but also steps towards creating a new framework enabling a substantial increase of private investment from both partners. In this respect, the EPP Position Paper on Partnership with Africa provides a comprehensive approach, including addressing the root causes of migration.

It is essential to work with partner countries on resilience and stability, and on creating jobs and opportunities for both migrants and refugees as well as for host communities. For the EPP Group, measures aimed at contributing to the economic development of local communities and regions and, in so doing, reducing migration pressure by improving the skills and employability of third-country nationals remain at the centre of our core objectives.

The EU's enlargement efforts in the Western Balkans and the EU's active neighbourhood policy help to broaden the area of prosperity and strengthen the rule of law and are therefore effective tools for better management of migration flows. Enhanced strategic and operational cooperation between the EU and the countries on its eastern and southern borders should be an integral part of these efforts.

Serbia's unprincipled visa policy, which rewards certain countries that do not recognize the Republic of Kosovo's independence, has contributed to the dramatic increase of illegal migration on the Western Balkan route from countries such as Burundi, India and Cuba. The EU cannot ignore the roles that States play in creating migratory pressure.

Integration

While the EU can provide incentives and support for the action of Member States based on Article 79 (4) TFEU, integration remains an issue of national competence. However, integration policies and strategies are necessary for the success of EU asylum and migration policy and an important investment for the future.

Migratory flows in recent years have reinforced the need for effective policies on integration of third-country nationals. It is a precondition for an inclusive, cohesive and prosperous society. We understand that integration is a two-way process and respect for European values and the rights and freedoms at the centre of the Union must be an integral part of the integration process.

We call for a new approach to integration by Member States, focused on social and labour market inclusion, providing language and integration courses with specific focus on young and female migrants and other vulnerable people as well as addressing the challenges of marginalised communities, including urban ghettos. Integration at its earliest stage, through mainstreamed and targeted measures, is an essential factor contributing to societal cohesion overall in Europe, as well as an important factor in minimising risks with regards to possible exposure to criminal networks and radicalisation.

The rule of law and fundamental rights, such as freedom of speech, gender equality and respect and dialogue between religious communities, are essential elements of our value system and must be respected by all.

We cannot allow parallel societies in which the core values of the Union are systematically undermined, and we must step up the fight against any extremist ideologies.

The participation of all actors involved in society is crucial and while respecting the competences of Member States as regards integration measures; such measures for all legally-residing third-country nationals should promote inclusion rather than isolation, working hand in hand with local and regional authorities that have a key role in the integration processes.

Instrumentalisation

The EU has experienced instrumentalisation of migrants on its external borders on four major occasions: the Greek/Turkish border in Evros in February 2020; the Spanish/Moroccan border in Ceuta in May 2020; and by the authorities of Belarus against Lithuania, Latvia and Poland in the summer of 2021, as well as the ongoing constant flow of irregular migrants in Cyprus from Türkiye through the Green Line. Despite the attempts to destabilise the EU and/or for political purposes, the instrumentalisation of migrants against the EU has not been successful. This was thanks to the quick and coordinated response from the Member States and EU border agencies and further highlights the importance of the EU having an effective and integrated border management system in place at all times. Furthermore, these hybrid attacks were unsuccessful due to cooperation with countries of origin and transit to stop the instrumentalisation of human beings against the EU.

Effective control of the EU's external borders prevents neighbouring countries from weaponising migrants against the Union, whilst ensuring migrants have their fundamental rights respected. In this regard, the EPP Group calls on the Commission to make funding from the EU budget available for the creation of physical infrastructure, as requested by twelve Member States, to strengthen national border protection systems.

In the future, the EU must quickly respond to instrumentalisation through a comprehensive approach that takes into account operational, legal, financial and diplomatic measures. This includes close cooperation with countries of origin and transit to prevent departures and visa policies aimed at destabilising the EU, as recently seen at the EU borders with Serbia. In this regard, the EU must also find a sustainable and long-lasting solution to the situation in Cyprus, where Türkiye abuses

the green line to facilitate the movement of third-country nationals into the EU.

The EPP group strongly supports the Commission's proposal to include provisions on the instrumentalisation of migrants in the Schengen Borders Code, allowing them to act in a more effective and coordinated manner in the event that this instrumentalisation occurs. Enhancing our security by adhering to our European values and not letting ourselves be blackmailed will also send the right signal to those who are using or are tempted to use migrants as weapons against the EU and its Member States.

Lessons learned from the reception of Ukrainian refugees.

Since February 24, 2022, almost 12 million registered border crossings from Ukraine have occurred, of which a large majority entered the Union via Poland. Thousands of citizens, families and non-governmental organizations have opened their hearts and homes to Ukrainian refugees. The EPP Group warmly welcomes the unprecedented and united show of solidarity seen in the response with Ukraine, including activating the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD) for the first time in its 20-year history.

The TPD has proven to be an efficient tool in providing swift protection to Ukrainian refugees, and for Member States to effectively manage the large-scale arrivals. So far, more than 4.4 million Ukrainian citizens have received temporary protection in the EU, benefiting from a wide range of rights, including access to the labour market and education systems. The EPP Group welcomes the commitment by the Council to extend the implementation of the TPD for another year, providing Ukrainian refugees with certainty regarding their legal status in the EU.

The EPP Group reiterates that the activation of the TPD is an extraordinary measure to deal with a large-scale migratory movement of Ukrainians fleeing the direct consequences of Russia's illegal war. No situation has thus far been equal to that of the Ukrainian refugees. Since 2017, Ukrainian citizens have been able to visit the Union for 90 days without first obtaining a Schengen visa. The activation of the TPD in this specific situation provided Ukrainian refugees a legal stay in the Union beyond the 90 days, without burdening the asylum systems of the Member States.

The Commission put forward its proposal for a Regulation on Crisis and Force Majeure in September 2020, which would repeal the TPD. The EPP Group supports the adoption of this regulation, as there is a need for a better implementation of solidarity with Member States that, due to their geographical nature, are facing a disproportionate burden. However, the objectives of the regulation differ from those of TPD, which is why the EPP Group does not support the repeal of TPD.

In addition, the reception of Ukrainians has further emphasised the importance of a vibrant civil society for the integration and community support of third-country nationals. EU funding to ensure adequate housing, education and health care is vital to support Member States and in particular local authorities in covering the costs and providing better assistance to those fleeing Putin's illegal war in Ukraine. It is essential that the EU's support to Member States and local authorities continues due to the extension of the TPD. The EPP Group further encourages Member States to ensure Ukrainian refugees have full access to the labour market and language classes to further enhance their integration. From a circular economy perspective, this could also contribute to the rebuilding of Ukraine once the war ends.

However, the reception of Ukrainian refugees has identified the limited capacities of the Member States' reception systems. It further underscores the urgent need for swiftly distinguishing between refugees or beneficiaries of international protection and economic migrants. In 2021, the EU Member States took 524,400 asylum decisions, of which only 39 percent were granted. Thus, a large majority of those seeking asylum are not entitled to international protection. At the same time, the return rate is far too low.

Climate-related migration

Climate change is already an underlying factor for migration or displacement, and more people are expected to migrate due to the impacts of climate change on livelihoods, armed conflicts, food and water security. It is a threat multiplier for existing tensions and precarious challenges in the developing world. 216 million people could be forced to migrate within their own countries by 2050 due to climate change, according to a report from the World Bank. These climate migration "hot spots" will emerge as soon as 2030 and worsen by 2050.

There is a need for the EU to consider the definite impacts climate change will have on the migratory flows to our Union in the future. Drought, increased temperatures and other extreme weather effects will not only result in large displacements of people but will also cause famine.

However, climate change is not a cause compatible with protection within the EU asylum acquis or the international refugee regime. It is vital that EU development cooperation and humanitarian policies support climate change adaptation, build resilience and reinforce disaster risk reduction in third countries as a way to mitigate the consequences of climate change on human mobility.

In this regard, the high poverty rate in several third countries undermines the resilience of local populations, which is why a reinforced focus on economic growth and job creation is imperative to address socioeconomic challenges. Asylum in Europe cannot become a permanent solution to global injustices.